The Late Great Soviet: Not Quite Dead, Just Smelling Bad

The Nation - Stephen F. Cohen - While the Soviet breakup led American specialists back to cold war-era concepts of historical inevitability, it convinced many of their Russian counterparts that ?there are always alternatives in history? and that a Soviet reformation had been one of the ?lost alternatives" -- a chance to democratize and marketize Russia by methods more gradualist, consensual and less traumatic, and thus more fruitful and less costly, than those adopted after 1991.

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The breakup of the Soviet Union happened 15 years ago on December 8, and the American media still misses the significance of the breakup, how "the peoples' assets" went to the elites as Yeltsin illegally ended the USSR. There are parallels between the Russian coups in 1991 and 1917, not the least of which was the loss of authentic democracy.

The Soviet Union, R.I.P.?

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The most consequential event of the second half of the twentieth century took place surreptitiously fifteen years ago at a secluded hunting lodge in the Belovezh Forest near Minsk. On December 8, 1991, heads of three of the Soviet Union?s fifteen republics, led by Boris Yeltsin of Russia, met there to sign documents abolishing that seventy-four-year-old state.

Reactions to the end of the Soviet Union were, and remain, profoundly different. For the overwhelming majority of American commentators, it was an unambiguously positive turning point in Russian and world history. As the Soviet breakup quickly became the defining moment in a new American triumphalist narrative, the U.S. government?s hope that Mikhail Gorbachev?s pro-Soviet democratic and market reforms of 1985?91 would succeed was forgotten. In the media, all the diverse complexity of Soviet history was now presented as ?Russia?s seven decades as a rigid and ruthless police state,? a history ?every bit as evil as we had thought -- indeed more so.? A New York Times columnist even suggested that a ?fascist Russia? would have been a ?much better thing.?

American academic specialists reacted similarly, though in their own way. With few exceptions, they reverted, also forgetting what they had only recently written, to pre-Gorbachev Sovietological axioms that the system had always been unreformable and doomed. The opposing scholarly view that there had been other possibilities in Soviet history, ?roads not taken,? was again dismissed as an ?improbable idea? based on ?dubious,? if not disloyal, notions. Gorbachev?s reforms, despite having so remarkably dismantled the Communist Party dictatorship, had been ?a chimera,? and the Soviet Union therefore died from a ?lack of alternatives.?

Accordingly, most American specialists no longer asked, even in light of the human tragedies that followed in the 1990s, if a reforming Soviet Union might have been the best hope for the post-Communist future of Russia or any of the other former republics. (Nor have any mainstream commentators asked if its survival would have been better for world affairs.) On the contrary, they concluded, as a leading university authority insisted, that everything Soviet had to be discarded by ?the razing of the entire edifice of political and economic relations.? Such certitudes are now, of course, the only politically correct ones in U.S. policy, media and academic circles.

A large majority of Russians, on the other hand, as they have regularly made clear in opinion surveys taken during the past fifteen years, regret the end of the Soviet Union, not because they pine for ?Communism? but because they lost a familiar state and secure way of life. No less important, they do not share the nearly unanimous Western view that the Soviet Union?s ?collapse? was ?inevitable? because of inherent fatal defects. They believe instead, and for good reason, that three ?subjective? factors broke it up: the way Gorbachev carried out his political and economic reforms; a power struggle in which Yeltsin overthrew the Soviet state in order to get rid of its president, Gorbachev; and property-seizing Soviet bureaucratic elites, the nomenklatura, who were more interested in ?privatizing? the state?s enormous wealth in 1991 than in defending it.

Most Russians, including even the imprisoned post-Soviet oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, therefore still see December 1991 as a ?tragedy,? a perspective expressed in the adage: ?Anyone who does not regret the breakup of the Soviet Union has no heart.? (It continues: ?And anyone who thinks it can be reconstructed has no head.?)

In addition, a growing number of Russian intellectuals have come to believe that something essential was lost -- a historic opportunity, thwarted for centuries, to achieve the nation?s political and economic modernization by continuing, with or without Gorbachev, his Soviet reformation, or perestroika, as he named it. While the Soviet breakup led American specialists back to cold war-era concepts of historical inevitability, it convinced many of their Russian counterparts that ?there are always alternatives in history? and that a Soviet reformation had been one of the ?lost alternatives" -- a chance to democratize and marketize Russia by methods more gradualist, consensual and less traumatic, and thus more fruitful and less costly, than those adopted after 1991.

Whether or not some version of Gorbachev?s perestroika was a missed opportunity for Russia?s ?non-catastrophic transformation? instead of its recurring ?modernization through catastrophe? may be for historians to decide. But it was already clear at the time, or should have been, that the way the Soviet Union ended -- in fateful circumstances about which standard American accounts are largely silent or mythical -- boded ill for the future. (One myth, promoted by Yeltsin?s supporters to claim he saved the country from Yugoslavia?s bloody fate, is that the dissolution was ?peaceful.? In reality, ethnic civil wars and other strife soon erupted in Central Asia and Transcaucasia, killing hundreds of thousands of former Soviet citizens and brutally displacing even more, a process still under way.)

Most generally, there were ominous parallels between the Soviet breakup and the collapse of Tsarism in 1917. In both cases, the way the old order ended resulted in a near total destruction of Russian statehood that plunged the country into prolonged chaos, conflict and misery. Russians call what ensued smuta, a term full of dread derived from previous historical experiences and not expressed in the usual translation, ?time of troubles.? Indeed, in this respect, the end of the Soviet Union may have had less to do with the specific nature of that system than with recurring breakdowns in Russian history.

The similarities between 1991 and 1917, despite important differences, were significant. Once again, hopes for evolutionary progress toward democracy, prosperity and social justice were crushed; a small group of radicals, this time around Yeltsin, imposed extreme measures on the nation; fierce struggles over property and territory tore apart the foundations of a vast multiethnic state; and the victors destroyed longstanding economic and other essential structures to build entirely anew, ?as though we had no past.? Once again, elites acted in the name of a better future but left society bitterly divided over yet another of Russia?s perennial ?accursed questions" -- why it had happened. And again the people paid the price.

All of those recapitulations unfolded, amid mutual (and lasting) charges of betrayal, during the three months from August to December 1991, when the piecemeal destruction of the Soviet state occurred. The period began and ended with coups (as in 1917) -- the first a failed military putsch against Gorbachev organized by his own ministers in the center of Moscow, the second Yeltsin?s liquidation of the state itself in the Belovezh Forest. The period culminated in a revolution from above against the Soviet system of power and property by its own elites. Looking back, Russians of different views have concluded that it was during those months that political extremism and unfettered greed cost them a chance for democratic and economic progress.

Certainly, it is hard to imagine a political act more extreme than abolishing what was still, for all its crises and defections, a nuclear superpower state of 286 million citizens. And yet, Yeltsin did it, as even his sympathizers acknowledged, precipitously and in a way that was ?neither legitimate nor democratic.? A profound departure from Gorbachev?s commitment to social consensus and constitutionalism, it was a return to the country?s ?neo-Bolshevik? tradition of imposed change, as many Russian, and even a few Western, writers have characterized it. The ramifications were bound to endanger the democratization achieved during the preceding six years of perestroika.

Yeltsin and his aides promised, for example, that their extreme measures were ?extraordinary? ones, but as had happened before in Russia, most recently during Stalin?s forcible collectivization of the peasantry in 1929?33, they grew into a system of rule. (The next such measures, already being planned, were economic ?shock therapy.?) Those initial steps also had a further political logic. Having ended the Soviet state in a way that lacked legal or popular legitimacy -- in a referendum only nine months before, 76 percent of the large turnout had voted to preserve the Union -- the Yeltsin ruling group soon became fearful of real democracy. In particular, an independent, freely elected Parliament and the possibility of relinquishing power in any manner raised, we are told by Russians with impeccable democratic credentials, the specter of ?going on trial and to prison.? And indeed Yeltsin?s armed overthrow of the Russian Parliament soon followed.

The economic dimensions of Belovezh were no less portentous. Dissolving the Union without any preparatory stages shattered a highly integrated economy. In addition to abetting the destruction of the state, it was a major cause of the collapse of production across the former Soviet territories, which fell by almost half in the 1990s. That in turn contributed to mass poverty and its attendant social pathologies, which are still, according to a respected Moscow economist, the ?main fact? of Russian life today.

The economic motivation behind elite support for Yeltsin in 1991 was even more ramifying. As a onetime Yeltsin supporter wrote thirteen years later, ?Almost everything that happened in Russia after 1991 was determined to a significant extent by the divvying-up of the property of the former USSR.? Here too there were foreboding historical precedents. Twice before in twentieth-century Russia the nation?s fundamental property had been confiscated -- the landlords? vast estates and bourgeoisie?s industrial and other large assets in the revolution of 1917-18, and then the land of 25 million peasant farmers in Stalin?s collectivization drive. The after-effects of both episodes plagued the country for years to come.

Soviet elites took much of the state?s enormous wealth, which for decades they had defined in law and ideology as the ?property of all the people,? with no regard for fair procedures or public opinion. To maintain their dominant position and enrich themselves, they wanted the most valuable state property distributed from above, without the participation of legislatures or any other representatives of society. They achieved that goal first by themselves, through ?spontaneous nomenklatura privatization,? and then, after 1991, through Kremlin decrees issued by Yeltsin, who played, as a former top aide put it, ?first fiddle in this historic divvying-up.? But as a result, privatization was also haunted from the beginning by, in the words of another Russian scholar, a ??dual illegitimacy? -- in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of the population.?

The political and economic consequences should have been easy to anticipate. Fearful for their dubiously acquired assets and even for their lives, the new property holders, who formed the post-Soviet elite, were as determined as Yeltsin to limit or reverse the parliamentary electoral democracy initiated by Gorbachev. In its place, they strove to create a kind of praetorian political system devoted to and corrupted by their wealth, at best a ?managed? democracy. (Hence their choice of Vladimir Putin, a vigorous man from the security services, to replace the enfeebled President Yeltsin in 1999.) And for much the same reason, uncertain how long they could actually retain their immense property, they were more interested in stripping its assets than investing in it. The result was an 80 percent decline in investment in Russia?s economy by the end of the 1990s and the opposite of the nation?s modernization, its actual demodernization.

Considering all of these ominous circumstances, why did so many American commentators, from politicians and journalists to scholars, hail the breakup of the Soviet Union as a ?breakthrough? to democracy and free-market capitalism? Where Russia was concerned, their reaction was, as usual, based mainly on anti-Communist ideology and hopeful myths, not historical or contemporary realities. Alluding to that myopia on the part of people who had sought the destruction of the Soviet state, a Moscow philosopher later remarked bitterly, ?They were aiming at Communism but hitting Russia.?

One of the most ideological myths surrounding the end of the Soviet Union was, to quote both another Times columnist and a leading American historian, that it ?collapsed at the hands of its own people? and brought to power in Russia ?Yeltsin and the democrats? -- even ?moral leaders? -- who represented the people. No popular revolution, national election or referendum having mandated or sanctioned the breakup, there was no empirical evidence for this supposition. Indeed, everything strongly suggested very different interpretations, as most Russians have long since concluded.

As for Yeltsin?s role, even the most event-making leaders need supporters in order to carry out historic acts. Yeltsin abolished the Soviet Union in December 1991 with the backing of a self-interested alliance. All of its groups called themselves ?democrats? and ?reformers,? but the two most important were unlikely allies: the nomenklatura elites that were pursuing the ?smell of property like a beast after prey,? in the revealing metaphor of Yeltsin?s own chief minister, and wanted property much more than any kind of democracy or free-market competition; and an avowedly prodemocracy wing of the intelligentsia. Traditional enemies in the pre-Gorbachev Soviet system, they colluded in 1991 largely because the intelligentsia?s radical market ideas seemed to justify nomenklatura privatization.

But the most influential pro-Yeltsin intellectuals, who played leading roles in his post-Soviet government, were neither coincidental fellow travelers nor real democrats. Since the late 1980s, they had insisted that free-market economics and large-scale private property would have to be imposed on a recalcitrant Russian society by an ?iron hand? regime. This ?great leap,? as they extolled it, would entail ?tough and unpopular? policies resulting in ?mass dissatisfaction? and thus would necessitate ?anti-democratic measures.? Like the property-seeking elites, they saw Russia?s newly elected legislatures as an obstacle. Admirers of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who had brutally imposed economic change on Chile, they said of Yeltsin, now their leader, ?Let him be a dictator!? Not surprisingly, they cheered (along with the U.S. government and mainstream media) when he used tanks to destroy Russia?s popularly elected Parliament in 1993.

Political and economic alternatives still existed in Russia after 1991. Other fateful struggles and decisions lay ahead. And none of the factors contributing to the end of the Soviet Union were inexorable or deterministic. But even if authentic democratic and market aspirations were among them, so were cravings for power, political coups, elite avarice, extremist ideas and widespread perceptions of illegitimacy and betrayal. All of these factors continued to play a role after 1991, but it should already have been clear which would prevail.

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